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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4150
INFO RUEHBE/AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN 0062
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN 5576
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 3640
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8508
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3517
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 4678
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 2797
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0420

C O N F I D E N T I A L NASSAU 000516

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STATE FOR WHA/CAR RCBUDDEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/18/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KCRM](#) [BF](#)
SUBJECT: TIGHT, EMOTIONAL RACE LEADS TO PRE-ELECTION
VIOLENCE

REF: NASSAU 435

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires D. Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4(b) and
(d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Bahamas is generally known for peaceful and fair elections, but with political parties contending desperately for voters in a tight election scheduled for May 2, an increasing lack of civility between the parties has carried over into the public. A brawl between supporters, including gunfire, arson at a campaign headquarters, gunfire into another campaign office, a stabbing, and several cases of vandalism this week followed harsh words between candidates at rival political rallies. Adding to emotions are the opposition Free National Movement's (FNM) claims that the governing Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) is unfairly using government resources and the state-owned media to influence voters. Following these outbursts of emotion, party leaders and the media have joined together to condemn election related violence. Despite these disturbing incidents, Post continues to expect relative calm to prevail during the elections. END SUMMARY.

RIVAL RALLIES TURN UP THE RHETORIC

¶2. (C) With elections scheduled for May 2, and little to differentiate the main parties substantively (reftel), the PLP and FNM have focused on personality and appealed to the emotions of constituents as they try to win power. The parties went toe-to-toe with competing mass-rallies in Nassau April 11. The PLP staged another rally April 17, with the follow-up FNM rally on April 19. During each of the rallies, style prevailed over substance, with loud music, dancing and emotional delivery of speeches more typical of a religious revival than an American-style campaign event. The heavy flow of alcohol, however, was not typical of a religious meeting, nor were bombastic speakers heaving insults at competing candidates.

¶3. (C) PLP speakers targeted their aggressive rhetoric at FNM leader Hubert Ingraham. Speakers led chants of "Kick the H.I.P." -- a derisive and violent reference to the FNM as the "Hubert Ingraham Party" due to Ingraham's authoritarian style. PLP leaders also continued reference to the FNM's

"white roots" -- the FNM grew out of the pre-independence and white-dominated United Bahamian Party (UBP). When not bashing the opposition, the PLP cited their record at promoting economic prosperity, job creation and social programs.

14. (C) The FNM rally similarly focused its fire against PLP leader Perry Christie and what they claim is his government's record of scandals to underscore their main election theme -- "It is About Trust." The FNM also accused the PLP of cheating to win election, citing the PLP's late boundary changes and exclusive use of government-owned media and other public resources for its campaign. (NOTE: Prime Minister Christie called the late boundary changes the key to victory for the PLP (reftel). The gerrymandering clearly happened after legally mandated deadlines to the clear disadvantage of the opposition. END NOTE.) FNM leader Ingraham had mentioned to the Ambassador in his recent farewell call that government control of the main television station presented a major obstacle to his party, as the government kept his party off the airwaves while using the television to promote the government's agenda and its candidates.

15. (U) The FNM also accused the PLP of buying votes. During a press conference April 20, FNM candidates claimed crowds gathered outside of two PLP campaign offices in Grand Bahama to receive cash payments from \$500 to \$2000 in return for vote promises. The FNM has alleged collusion by local police. Local sources made similar allegations, and Grand Bahama media ran photos of the crowds outside the alleged cash distribution points. Some reports on this allegation allege that voters who take a cell-phone photograph of their marked ballot can claim money from PLP candidates.

VIOLENT OUTBURSTS MAR CAMPAIGN

16. (U) With neither party appearing to have a clear advantage, and with emotions running high after big, high-octane rallies, several violent events marred campaigns last week. During the PLP rally April 17, a drive-by shooter fired at PLP headquarters. At an April 17 PLP rally, there was a stabbing (though this seemed more a personal vendetta than a political act). On April 18, arsonists (police have confirmed use of accelerant) set fire to the campaign headquarters of former FNM leader Tommy Turnquest. These more violent events follow multiple complaints over the past week of vandalism to campaign signs in multiple constituencies.

17. (U) On April 19, a brawl between FNM and PLP supporters broke out in Fox Hill, the hotly-contested constituency of Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell. Opposing parades of supporters met up on a street in Fox Hill, resulting in bottle and rock throwing, gunfire and scuffles. The brawl closed down the streets and sent residents fleeing for cover until police arrived to break up the crowds. There were no known injuries.

18. (U) Party leaders responded quickly to the violence, joining with police and media to urge calm and civility while condemning the persons responsible. Police have promised to increase patrols. However, more than one commentator has noted the candidates' lack of civility and the culpability of the candidates in inspiring this new trend by setting a bad example. After these warnings, subsequent PLP and FNM rallies (attended in part by the Pol Chief) were calm.

FAIR AND VIOLENCE-FREE ELECTIONS STILL ANTICIPATED

19. (C) COMMENT: The predominant consensus among Bahamian political pundits at this point is that the race remains either party's to win. We have been told by FNM insiders have said that Hubert Ingraham feels very confident that his party will win 26 seats and take over the government, noting that he has a solid track record in predicting Bahamian elections. Many PLP's express similar confidence about their

party's chances, though most acknowledge their party will lose seats even if they win overall. During this tight horse race, heightened rhetoric and underhanded politicking are to be expected. However, election violence -- even in the moderate doses seen this past week -- is a surprise, as The Bahamas has a history of peaceful elections. It appears that party leaders and police have been able to calm tensions and halt the violence for the time being. Despite high emotions, Post continues to expect that elections will be free, fair and generally peaceful. END COMMENT.
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